

A black and white photograph of two Ethiopian wolves (Canis simensis) on a grassy hill. They are standing on their hind legs, facing each other with their mouths open as if playing or communicating. The background is a bright, overcast sky.

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GEOGRAPHIC
magazine

ETHIOPIA'S WOLVES

ISSUE
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Image by Will Burrard-Lucas

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CRY WOLF

WHAT IT TAKES TO SAVE AFRICA'S MOST ENDANGERED CARNIVORE



by

ANTON CRONE

17 October 2014



The wolves came to Africa when the ice receded. The hypothesis goes that, as the land warmed about 100,000 years ago, relatives of the grey wolf crossed the land bridge from Europe and colonised the Afroalpine grasslands and heathlands in the horn of Africa. The continent's new immigrants would remain there, refining their skills at hunting rodents on the alpine plateaux, developing longer limbs, muzzles and smaller set-apart teeth until they were masters of the Afroalpine – efficient, lean, killing machines of mole rats, grass rats and hyrax.





1. An Ethiopian wolf silently stalks its prey.
2. The wolf pounces.
3. A female brings a freshly killed hare to a male. Being small prey specialists, Ethiopian wolves do not hunt in packs.
4. The most common victim of the Ethiopian wolf, a grass rat.

©Will Burrard-Lucas

There were never many wolves because of their limited habitat – probably a few thousand at best, and today there are little more than 500 alive, making the Ethiopian wolf the rarest species of canid, three times rarer than the panda bear, and Africa’s most endangered carnivore.

‘They are victims of their own success. They evolved to thrive as specialists of the Afroalpine grassland. But because of the warming continent, and the pressure of humans, now they are restricted to tiny mountain pockets and the pressure continues ever upwards,’ explains the founder of the **Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme**, Professor Claudio Sillero, a conservation biologist at the University of Oxford’s **WildCRU**.

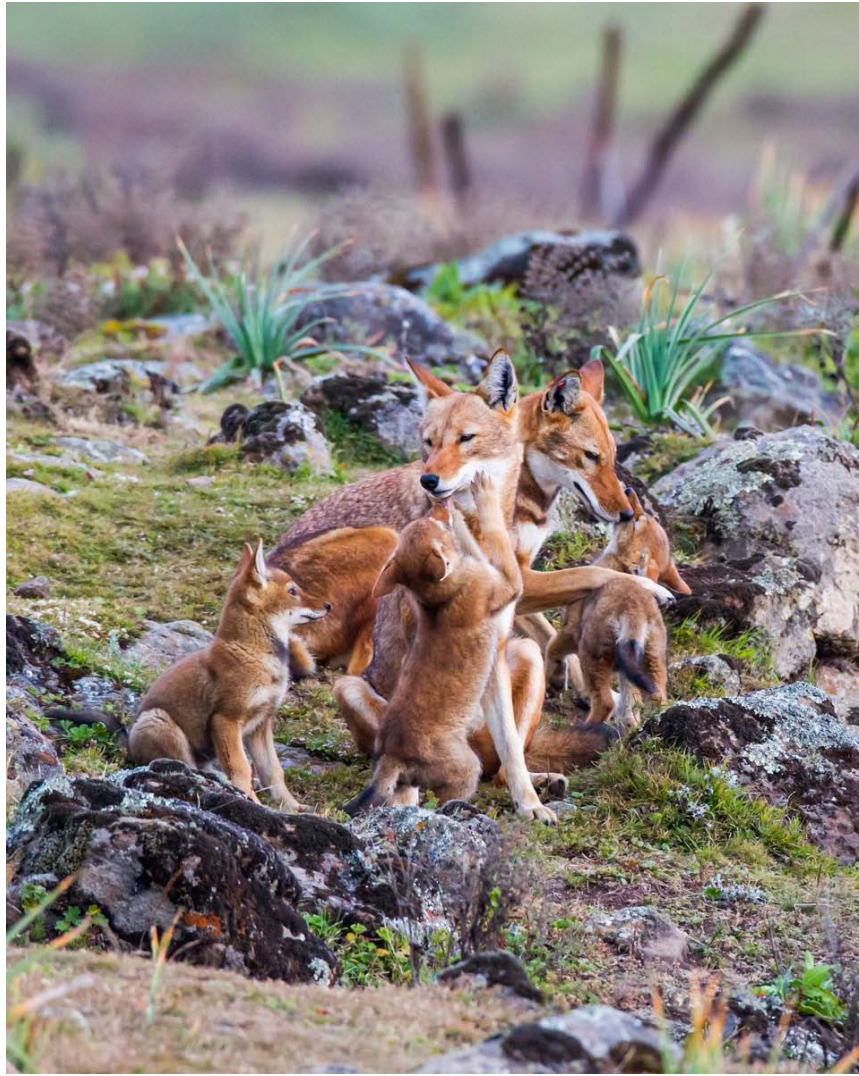


An Ethiopian Wolf patrols its territory in the Web Valley. This remote and inaccessible area is one of the last remaining strongholds of the Ethiopian Wolf. It is superb wolf habitat due to the very high density of rodents it supports. ©Will Burrard-Lucas

It is not for lack of food that their numbers are small. Their Afroalpine environment has a particularly high rodent biomass. 'It holds more prey biomass than a typical East African grassland. We're talking three thousand kilos of rats per square kilometer. It's an amazing resource for wolves, other carnivores and many raptors,' explains Sillero. But this environment is also a resource for cattle and goat herders, and the peril they bring is rabies by way of domestic dogs. The dogs are there to protect herds from spotted hyenas and other predators. Ethiopian wolves do not prey on such large animals, but it doesn't stop dogs interacting with wolves and inevitably they contract the virus too.

3000kg of rats per sq.km means the Afroalpine is an amazing resource for wolves

Sillero began studying Ethiopian wolves in the late eighties. Throughout that time and long before, interaction between domestic dogs and wolves was relatively common, even resulting in hybrids. Through neutering of hybrids and reducing the occurrence of free-ranging dogs in wolf habitat, the EWCP team is pushing hard to stop cross-breeding. 'But in the late eighties and early nineties we had a bunch of very odd looking wolves out there,' Sillero jokes. He reminds me that it is through biting that rabies is transferred. The behaviour of the animal changes once the virus takes control, altering its behaviour and literally driving it to increase dispersal of the virus. The animal becomes more aggressive and ranges more widely, biting other creatures including livestock and humans.





1. The Taura pack in the Web Valley, Bale Mountains National Park.
2. Domestic dogs can transmit rabies and other diseases to the wolves but are needed by the locals to protect their livestock from leopards and hyenas.
3. The alpine terrain makes things difficult for the EWCP team and, like the herders, they will often use horses to cover more difficult terrain.
4. Professor Claudio Sillero and the EWCP team vaccinate a wolf in the Bale Mountains.

©Will Burrard-Lucas

Rabies is not unusual among Ethiopian wolves and comes around in cycles. But the latest cycle of rabies was particularly bad. 'We have major outbreaks every ten years, but the last one was after five years so they appear to be occurring more frequently now.'

EWCP's team is made up of 35 Ethiopian nationals and is supported by the **Born Free Foundation**. The Bale Mountains National Park, containing the highest population of wolves with just over three hundred individuals, is the core area of their work. On 10 July the EWCP picked up their first carcass here. By 11 August they had found four more carcasses testing positive for rabies and Sillero and his team began vaccinating the wolves. 'Unless we step in and vaccinate, the impact is dire. You lose three out of four wolves in the effected population.' In this case a population of 66 lost an estimated 25 wolves before it appeared to be under control. Sillero remains cautious and will not declare the wolves out of danger until he and his team have monitored the situation for a few more weeks.

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For the last few years Sillero has been moving away from a reactive vaccination approach in order to implement a proactive approach with a proven oral vaccine that is put in food. This could enable them to prevent or lessen the impact of future outbreaks and build some immunity in the population. They were testing this process when the last outbreak occurred and were able to monitor the animals that had taken the oral vaccine. They all survived. But the team's work is never done. Specialised creatures require special management, and Sillero takes all factors into account, particularly humans.

Humans colonised the Ethiopian landscape long before the wolves

Ethiopia is also the home of Lucy, our own ancestor. The discovery of this 3.2 million year old hominin fossil confirmed this northern stretch of the great rift as one of the cradles of humankind. We humans crossed the same land bridge as the wolves about 700,000 years earlier, in reverse. But many of us remained and shaped the land of Ethiopia over hundreds of thousands of years, particularly through farming over the last 8,000 years and domestic livestock for even longer. A lack of resources makes it incredibly difficult to prevent traditional pastoralists from entering Ethiopia's National Parks.



1. A mother and pup enjoy quality time.
2. A two month old pup looks towards the photographer.
3. Cattle make their way across a valley. They compact the ground reducing rodent density. ©Will Burrard-

Lucas

Domestic dogs outnumber wolves in the National Park by more than two to one

Sillero understands the prevalence of humans, livestock and agriculture in the national parks and takes a holistic approach. 'In the horn of Africa the landscape is human dominated. There is no conservation without taking the local communities into account. In the big conservation areas in southern and east Africa, many are working with local communities because it's the right thing to do. But in Ethiopia you can't afford not to.'

In the last four weeks EWCP vaccinated 700 domestic dogs inside Bale National Park alone. They aim to vaccinate at least 70% of the dog population, but there are always new dogs coming in with the seasonal herders and this trickle is impossible to plug with the limited capacity of Sillero's team and the national park rangers.

EWCP educates herders about the impact of the virus on themselves and their livestock. Ethiopia has one of the world's highest casualty rates for rabies in humans, and it also has an economic impact. 'Some households lose about US\$70 of livestock in a year. To a Bale highlands family on an income of US\$200 a year, that is a significant number.' The Oromo

herders rely on horses for travel, and they also succumb to the virus adding another severe economic factor.

But the Ethiopian wolves bear the brunt of the virus. It is the one thing they are not specialised to overcome, and without Sillero and the EWCP's work, they might very well be extinct by now.




Sillero releases a wolf after vaccination.

©Will Burrard-Lucas

'In my time we've seen the wolf population in Bale oscillate between one hundred and fifty and three hundred and fifty. Social canids have the ability to reproduce well. You can have a litter of six or seven puppies annually. In a good year you might see thirty percent growth. Then a few years down the line you have an epidemic and you might lose three quarters of that population. We discourage getting too fixated on numbers.'

They try to stabilise those numbers with better enforcement

of park rules, education of shepherds, vaccination of their dogs, and of course the wolves. 'Even if we were to reintroduce wolves to places where they are currently absent, we might be looking at six hundred, seven hundred wolves across Ethiopia, never more than that. They are inherently rare and they are going to remain rare. Unless we succeed with our conservation efforts they are going to get rarer still.' Sillero is incredibly pragmatic in his approach. He doesn't cry wolf and remains determined, after decades of challenges, to preserve this rare species. His is a rare trait indeed. 

**You can help the EWCP protect the beautiful
Ethiopian wolf by [clicking here](#)**



The advertisement features a large central image of a wooden deck with a telescope on a tripod overlooking a vast green landscape. To the right of this image is the Zulu Waters Game Reserve logo, which includes a stylized bird icon, the text 'Zulu Waters GAME RESERVE', and five stars. Below the logo is the tagline 'Your Own Private African Retreat'. At the bottom of the advertisement is a row of five smaller images: a buffalo, a bedroom interior, a river, a zebra, and a group of people. The website address 'www.zuluwatersgamereserve.com' is displayed at the bottom.

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MEET THE WOLFPACK

— GALLERY —



THE ETHIOPIAN WOLF'S JOURNEY FROM DEN TO DISCOVERY OF A NEW WORLD



Images by
WILL BURRARD-LUCAS





Ethiopian wolf pups look out on a new world after emerging from their den for the first time. Pups spend the first three weeks of their lives hidden inside their den ©Will Burrard-Lucas



The lakes and ridges of the Sanetti Plateau in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains, home to little more than three hundred Ethiopian wolves. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



Playtime as mother wolf looks on. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



A pup finding its legs as it prances across the plateau. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



Pups greet a parent in a typically boisterous manner. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



A Chestnut-naped Francolin, just one of the many creatures that these pups are going to send scattering in fright. ©Will Burrard-Lucas

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There's always time for play. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



A curious pup hesitantly approaches the photographer.

©Will Burrard-Lucas



A couple of boisterous two-month old pups playing on a frosty morning. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



A young male surveys the frosty landscape at dawn. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



The sun touches the unique granite landscape of Rafu in the Bale Mountains, remnants of an ancient lava flow. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



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Ethiopian wolves patrolling their territory. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



An Ethiopian wolf walks through white heather on the Sanetti Plateau. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



Ethiopian wolves are typically very social animals. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



A juvenile bearded vulture (lammergeier) cruises over the plateau. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



Greeting one another after returning from solitary hunting. Specialising in small rodents Ethiopian wolves do not need to hunt in packs. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



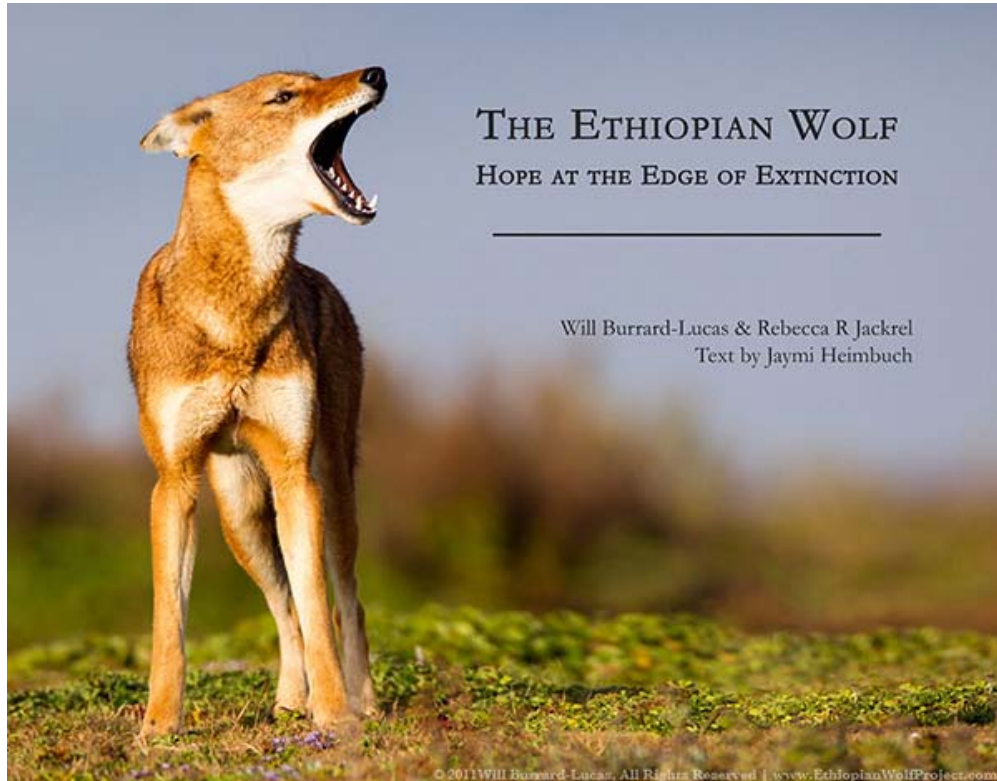
Certainly the most elegant and handsome of wolves. ©Will Burrard-Lucas



Starting a new family. Ethiopian wolves have the ability to reproduce well. But rabies epidemics can decimate populations making it increasingly harder for them to recover. ©Will Burrard-Lucas

Wildlife Photographer **Will Burrard-Lucas** donated his time and images to the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme to draw attention to the need to protect this beautiful and endangered species, of which little more than 500 are left. His incredible images have been captured in a new 152 page book 'The Ethiopian wolf. Hope at the edge of Extinction. 50% of sales profit goes directly to the EWCP, so buying this book is one of the best things you can do to save the Ethiopian wolf.

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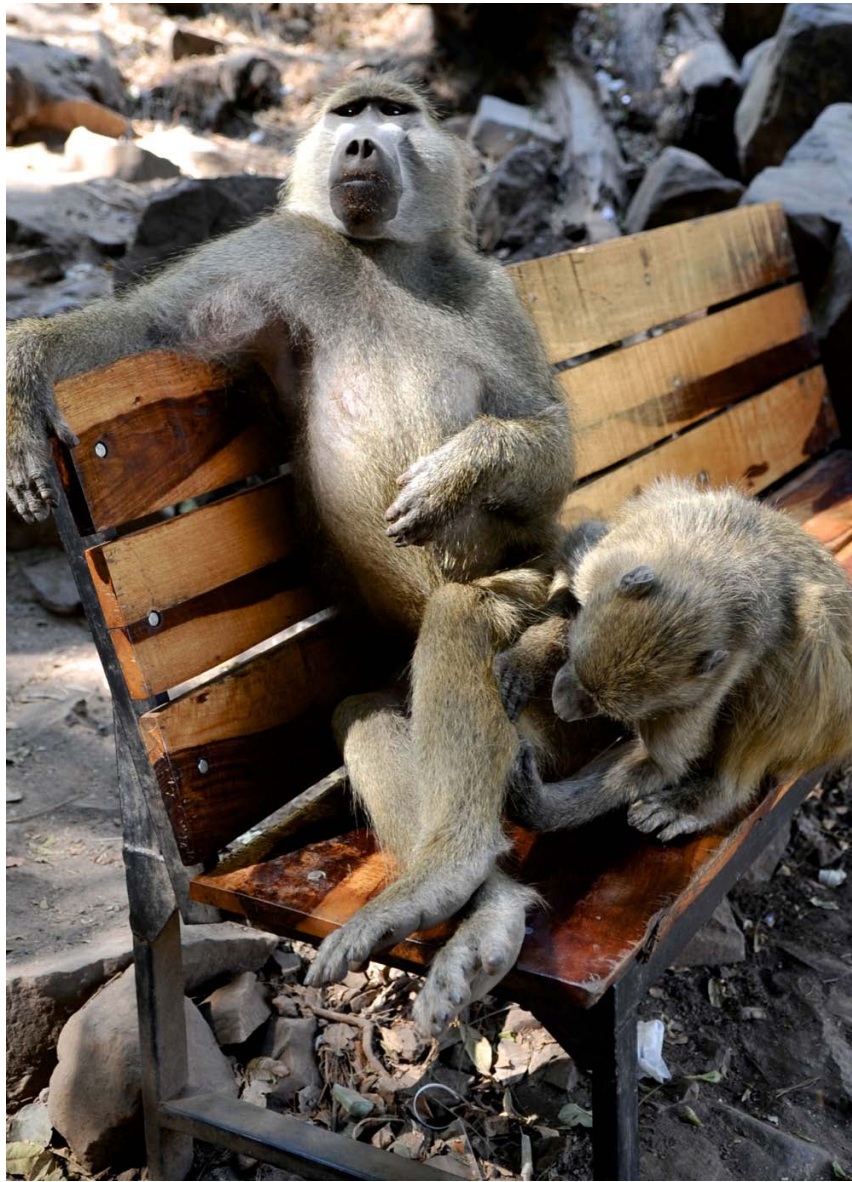


by

Michael Schwartz



‘I don’t like this situation,’ Heinrich, a South African friend said, as we crossed Victoria Falls Bridge. We were on our way back from watching the bungee jumping, a common stopping point for visitors at the falls, when a ragtag group of sinister looking specimens appeared, running full tilt in our direction. Fortunately, the gang of four took a quick turn into the nearby underbrush and disappeared through a hole in a fence. We breathed deep sighs of relief. ‘I’d sooner face a lion,’ Heinrich said emphatically. ‘At least you might fool one into thinking you’re as tough as they are.’



'You want to sit where?' A pair of baboons take over a bench in Victoria Falls.

©Anton Crone

Whether in a city or deep in the bush, I can't recall one African excursion that didn't involve an encounter with baboons. A menace to travelers, locals and other wildlife alike, they are adaptable to almost any environment in sub-Saharan Africa. And should you run into any on your travels, best you give them a wide berth.

What arguably makes baboons one of the most dangerous of Africa's wildlife is that they have little fear of humans. Their incredible strength notwithstanding, baboons are scavenging

opportunists, preying on anyone not paying attention. If one were to collect stories from travelers who lost their food or belongings to a baboon, it might make for an entertaining read.

Those few seconds when his guard (and sandwich) was down was all it took

I remember one particular tourist who was victim to a daring daytime snatch-and-grab. He was standing amidst a group of friends in downtown Livingstone, eating a sandwich and holding it at his side while he engaged in social pleasantries. And those precious few seconds when his guard (and sandwich) was down was all it took. I watched the thief carefully pad up to the group, prop himself up on his hind feet, grab the poor man's arm with one hand and with his other, seize the sandwich. What he did next came as more of a surprise to the astonished and bemused onlookers. Rather than running away from the scene of the crime, the baboon simply sat in place, calmly eating his prize, as if to say to everyone present, 'Go ahead. Try and take it back from me.' I shook my head, wondering if the laughing crowd had any idea how lucky they were not to have been injured.

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Camping in South Luangwa National Park in Zambia a year earlier, I'd just returned from a morning walk to get some breakfast. I'd dropped my pack near the entrance to my tent. Turning my back for a post-walk stretch, a sizable male silently crept up behind me. It was only when I heard the zipper of my pack being opened and its contents spilling onto the ground that I realised what was happening. To my horror, the baboon had decided to help himself to an extra pair of long johns and a bottle of water before scrambling off at the sound of shouts.




A baboon bolts across the landscape of Zakouma National Park in Chad while her baby holds on.

©Michael Lorentz

One of the more nerve-wracking encounters involved a shopkeeper chasing a baboon out of his store. Unfortunately, the owner succeeded in directing the startled beast straight toward me. Unable to think clearly I broke into a panic-induced sprint pursued by the charging baboon, hot on my heels before it eventually turned away. Though not funny to me at the time, the cartoonish sight of an angry shopkeeper chasing after a frightened baboon, who chased after an even more frightened foreigner, provided plenty of onlookers with a chuckle.

Despite of their annoying propensity to steal, I thoroughly enjoy watching baboons whenever I get the opportunity. Sure they aren't as handsome as lions; not as exotic looking as their West African mandrill cousins; not as awe-inspiring as elephants. But they have an interesting and complex social hierarchy, quite noticeable too if you really take the time to observe them. Like people, they love to play, squabble with one another, groom, throw tantrums and relax when the

occasion calls for it. They're funny looking, incredibly intelligent and a unique part of the African experience. All-in-all, you really should take a moment away from the more majestic wildlife to get a good look at these oft neglected creatures of the bush. Just be sure to cling tight to your valuables. 

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Contributors

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Wildlife photographer **WILL BURRARD-LUCAS** first developed a passion for wildlife living in Tanzania as a child. Since then he has photographed wildlife all over the world and primarily in Africa. Will aims to inspire people to celebrate and conserve the natural wonders of the planet through his imagery. He has partnered with a number of conservation organisations donating his time and images for their



fundraising activities. Working with the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme he draws attention to the challenges this species faces. His incredible images can be seen in **CRY WOLF** and the **MEET THE WOLFPACK** gallery. You can view more of Will's work on his [website](#).



ANTON CRONE quit the crazy-wonderful world of advertising to travel the world, sometimes working, sometimes drifting. Along the way he unearthed a passion for Africa's stories – not the sometimes hysterical news agency headlines we all feed off, but the real stories. Anton has a strong empathy with Africa's people and their need to meet daily requirements, often in remote environmentally hostile areas co-habitated by Africa's free-roaming animals. His journey brought him to Africa Geographic where he is now Editor in Chief, and custodian of Africa Geographic online magazine. In **CRY WOLF** Anton interviews Claudio Sillero of the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Program about his work to save the rarest canid of them all.



MICHAEL SCHWARTZ is an American freelance writer, consultant and member of the **International League of Conservation Writers**. His love of Africa began early in life and he has since traveled throughout the continent's southern region. With a BA in Journalism and an MA in African Studies, he has worked as a project specialist and researcher for several USAID funded initiatives in Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe. He has also volunteered as a humanitarian in Malawi. An avid outdoorsman and photographer, Michael's desire is to continue assisting in efforts to preserve Africa's pristine wilderness and magnificent wildlife. Michael is the writer of this week's African travel tale **PRINCE OF THIEVES**. You can view more of his work on his [website](#).



MICHAEL LORENTZ is passionate about wildlife, wilderness and elephants in particular. Born in South Africa, he knew from an early age that his true vision and happiness would lie in Africa's wild places. A passionate and award-winning photographer, Michael's work has been featured in several publications, as well as at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington DC. Having guided for 26 years, this remains his first professional love, conducting safaris throughout Southern, East and Central Africa with his company, **Passage To Africa**. An accomplished naturalist and committed conservationist, Michael provides his safari guests with a dazzling insight into the intricacies of Africa's wilderness. Michael's photographs of Africa's original troublemakers can be seen in **PRINCE OF THIEVES**.